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ABSTRACT

Drawing on relevant literature, the author of this paper briefly reviews the progress made by the alternative education movement. He provides descriptions of seven successful alternative schools' programs, including magnet schools, a school-without-walls, community schools, and a school-within-a-school. He concludes that alternative education at the present time may be described as small but growing. It does not pose a threat to traditional public education. Rather, it is a partner in innovation, trying out new solutions to a variety of educational problems. (Author/DS)

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# ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION:

# CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

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# ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

## BACKGROUND

Alternative education has always been a part of American education. Generally, however, the alternatives have been limited but to three choices: public education, private education, or none at all.

The real impetus for the wide range of today's alternative education came from several groups of writers. The first, those who were critical of contemporary education (and quite often its attendant society) included: John Holt, Theodore Roszak, Ivan Illich, Edgar Friedenberg, Charles Silberman, Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl, and Paul Goodman.[1]

The second group of writers were those who suggested alternatives in the form of progressive reform to the schools as they existed. In this group were many of the authors who had originally found fault with the schools, now suggesting means for reforming them. New names, however, also appeared: Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, and Mario Fantini.[2]

An almost completely different set of authors were responsible for another group of writings which called for more than just reform. These writings called for a complete and radical reconstruction of education. Included were: Theodore Brameld, Nobuo Shimahara, Alan Graubard, Ronald and Beatrice Gross, and Kenneth Clark.[3]

In addition to owing its existence to these various writings, alternative education has created its own literature, consisting mainly of descriptions of various experiments in alternative education as well as directories, manuals, and clearinghouse information.[4]

## THE NATURE OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

The heart of this criticism of traditional education and the point of the suggestions and experimentation for alternative education deals

collectively with: increasing basic skills, improving self image, reducing personal conflict, developing autonomy and independence, stimulating creativity, and the assimilation of knowledge in various content fields.[5]

Since these goals are generally similar to those of traditional education, it is not the goals alone which make alternative education identifiable. It is perhaps the way in which alternative education has sought to meet these goals that it has created an identity for itselfand challenged many of the previously accepted trappings of traditional public education. Alternative education asked penetrating questions:

What is a learning experience, and how can it be evaluated?

What, if any, is the role of parents in their children's education?

To what extent can freedom and responsibility be given to children?

How important is it for a child to discover his own cultural and ethnic background?

What is the importance and role of teacher training, facilities, and materials in the educational process?[6]

Alternative education also provided new answers to old questions which could be asked about any school:

Who are the adults involved?

What is the curriculum?

Why has that curriculum been chosen?

How is it taught?

Where is it taught?

When is it taught?

Terrance Deal of the School of Education at Stanford identified these questions, and maintains that a school must differ from conventional schools in all six of these dimensions in order to be properly classified as an

alternative school.[7]

Vernon H. Smith of the School of Education at Indiana University takes a more liberal view of what constitutes an alternative school. He lists the following characteristics as generally being present in an alternative school:

1. Options are provided for students, parents, and teachers.
2. There is a commitment to be more responsive to a specific educational need than the conventional school is.
3. The goals and objectives are more comprehensive than those of the conventional school.
4. It is flexible, making it responsive to planned evaluation and change.
5. It is smaller than the conventional school.[8]

The March 1973 "Curriculum Report" issued by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, presents a list, somewhat similar to that of Dr. Smith, of the characteristics which distinguish alternative schools from conventional ones:

1. There are significantly different curriculum and instructional practices.
2. There is greater involvement of staff and students in decision making.
3. There is flexibility and responsiveness to evolution and planned change.
4. There is extensive use of community resources and facilities.
5. There is a commitment to be more responsive to a particular educational need.
6. There is a smaller student body - ranging from 30 to 400.[9]

Perhaps the reason for the difficulty in finding a universally acceptable definition of alternative education lies in the fact that alternative education represents not one kind of school, but rather,

a wide range of types of schools. These include small independent "family" schools, schools within public schools, programs within public and private schools, guidance or career oriented schools, as well as the total experimental schools.[10]

There are no typical alternative schools. To understand this concept in American Education, one must appreciate the range of schools included in this term. Several types of schools are described at this point to illustrate the uniqueness of individual programs and the diveristy which they collectively represent.

SCHOOLS-WITHOUT-WALLS

One of the most famous of the schools-without-walls is the Parkway School in Philadelphia. Rather than being a school building, the Parkway school consists of about 850 students broken into four units in different parts of the city. The individual classes are taught in various facilities many of which are directly related to the course: city and state buildings, hospitals, businesses, educational institutions, private homes, churches, libraries, and offices.[11]

Each unit has about ten teachers who are responsible for roughly half of the courses, particularly those dealing with basic skills. The remainder of the subjects, largely academic, commercial, and vocational, are taught by community volunteers. The costs, borne by the Phildadelphia Board of Education, are about the same as in other Philadelphia schools. The popularity of the Parkway School is indicated by the fact that each year about 2,000 of the 52,000 pupils in Philadelphia apply for the 200 spots which are available.[12]

MAGNET SCHOOLS

Another form of alternative education operated within the structure of the public school is the magnet school. In this format a number of centers are established to attract pupils with specific areas of interest. These centers may be add-on programs to the regular curriculum, school-within-a-school, separate schools for specific programs, and cluster centers where a number of specific programs are operated within one facility.[13]

In Houston, for example, the following programs have been developed as magnet schools:

Elementary
- Vanguard (for students 1½ grades above age group)
- Bilingual Multicultural
- Music Academy
- Literary and Art Academy
- Fine Arts Academy
- Physical Development Academy
- Ecology and Outdoor Education Academy
- Mathematics and Science Academy
- Fundamental Schools
- Science Careers
- People Place (refers to a program with multicultural emphasis)
- International Trade Center
- Children's Literature Center
- Career Orientation Center
- Outdoor Education Learning Center

Secondary
- Aerodynamics Program
- School for Engineering
- Foreign Language Academy
- School for Business Administration
- Petrochemical Careers
- Middle School (Pilot)
- Year-Round School
- Contemporary Learning Center
- Vanguard
- Fundamental[14]

In Cincinnati, Ohio magnet schools have grown to the point that 16% of the 68,000 students are now enrolled in this alternative. It is expected that by 1980 enrollment will increase to 40% in these schools. One of the most successful centers in Cincinnati is the Creative and Performing Arts School with 554 pupils enrolled and another 500 on the waiting list. Pupils in grades four through nine enrolled have been chosen to perform in Broadway plays, TV shows and commercials, and symphony orchestras.[15]

With the new Education School Aid Act, the emphasis of magnet schools may be changed to some degree to become a school desegregation instrument. In this act part of a $50 million allowance has been made available in fiscal 1978 for planning and operating, but not constructing magnet schools. The act defines magnet schools as a "...school or education center that offers a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds."[16]

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Because of the present state of law relative to the governance of public schools, true community control is usually impossible. Generally, it is only in some privately supported school that parents and/or the community have real authority in such critical matters as teacher selection and evaluation, curricula, and financial management.[17]

The Warehouse Cooperative School, located on one floor of a warehouse in the Dorchester-Roxbury section of the city of Boston, is such a school. It is governed by a Board of Directors selected from the members and member-teachers of the coop. Support is supplied by tuition figured at 10% of taxable income of parents, plus an involvement of parents to include at least 90 hours of work

per year as a resource person in in some other function.[18]

About 80 children from 5 to 18 years of age are enrolled. Quotas are set so various economic backgrounds are represented in each age group. Admission is by application followed by a trial period for both parents and children. The teaching staff consists of 7½ professionals who are able to work with various age levels and in more than one discipline. Interns and practice teachers supplement the permanent staff.[19]

The curriculum is evolved as needed by students, parents, and staff. Each child is assigned an advisor who works between the staff and family to insure a balanced individual program.[20]

At the geographical center of the school is a 5-sided kiosk on which is posted the activities for the day in each area, and special activities which pupils may join if they wish. Much of the space within the warehouse has been divided into rooms in which one subject is featured, including music, science, art, drama, shop, and gym. There is also an area where each child has a place of his own, a "cubby" which he/she decorates and renovates from time to time, and which no one can enter without permission from the owner.[21]

A larger and better known community school is the East Harlem Block School. Although it receives some federal funds, the bulk of the support comes from numerous small grants provided by corporations and foundations. This is supplemented by the efforts of parents in such activities as raffles, rummage sales, cake sales, and dances.[22]

Starting from a tutoring program in 1963, the school now includes two day care centers and a private elementary school conducted in three large, but scattered storefronts. The supervision of the school is provided by a "board" consisting of one non-staff parent from each class and five at-large members, some of whom work for the school.[23]

The costs are comparable to other elementary schools in New York City. One of the chief differences, however, is that salaries are lower for teachers, but there are more of them to provide for smaller classes. Presently, East Harlem is seeking an alliance with public schools to provide a continuing stable support for its program.[24]

A community school which is actually supported by public funds is the Morgan Community School in northeast Washington, D.C. In 1967 the D.C. Board of Education transferred control of the school to the community, with Antioch College being responsible for teaching, staffing, and curriculum. After a short and unhappy association with Antioch, the responsibility for governance was turned over to a "board" composed of seven parents, three community representatives, three young adults (ages 16-24), one professional staff member, and one non-professional staff member.[25]

A pattern of differentiated staffing enables Morgan to maintain a pupil-teacher ratio of 15 to 1 while conducting a unique program including night and weekend classes for both children and adults. Courses include sewing, high school equivalency, typing, driver education, creative dance, physical fitness, and community beautification.[26]

SCHOOL-WITHIN-A-SCHOOL

At times the alternative school exists within the physical structure of a traditional school building. Such a school is Pontoon, enrolling about 160 pupils and located in two larger classrooms of Marion High School in Marion, Indiana. Pontoon enrolls pupils with average or above average abilities who have been identified as potential dropouts. These pupils have a history of a variety of problems, generally producing a lack of success in school and a dislike of school.[27]

Pontoon is different from the rest of Marion High School and most other high schools in that:

1. pupils handle most of their own discipline through student discipline committees
2. pupils participate in a variety of volunteer work in the community of Marion
3. the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator and fellow human being
4. pupils have considerable input into what will be studied and how it will be studied
5. there is considerable flexibility in program, evaluation, and course requirements.[28]

Stephen L. Bailey, Project Director of Pontoon, feels it has been successful because of pupil and parent reaction, better attendance, and significantly higher achievement. Mr. Bailey's assessment appears to have been reinforced by independent evaluators from Ball State University and an ESEA Title III evaluation team which awarded Pontoon a national validation.[29]

THE RESULTS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

While alternative schools are often considered dumping grounds by some of their critics, attendance is generally better and achievement at least as good as in conventional schools.[30]

Supporters of the movement say alternative schools are here to stay. They feel they satisfy a basic societal desire for educational institutions capable of responding quickly to perceived needs for change.[31] On the other hand, critics claim alternative education cannot even be considered a movement in education because of its very limited size.[32]

There are even some questions as to the degree which alternative education programs are truly alternative. Very often, because the goals of conventional education and alternative education are virtually the same, the substance of what happens in the two different programs is quite similar. There is more talk of innovation than innovative practices.[33]

Harry Broudy of the University of Illinois has concluded that alternative schools have been responsible for providing escape routes from responsible behavior. He supports his position by stating:

1. Freedom in schools is good only when structured to promote occupational, civic, and personal adequacy.

2. Provision for choices is good only if the relative merits of alternatives are considered, the person making the choice is concerned about making the right choice, and that if the wrong choice is made, the person can cope with it.

3. Provision for differences and the stimulation of creativity can be handled in the public school setting without constructing wholly new educational institutions.[34]

Terrence Deal of Stanford has concluded that the alternative school movement in education has proven to be a failure, "...leaving as one of its chief legacies a reinforced set of conventional beliefs about schools and learning." He lists the following as reasons for individual failure in secondary alternative schools:

1. Important educational goals were not achieved as well by innovative, humanistic schools as by the more traditionally oriented schools.

2. There was insufficient funding to permit these schools to continue.

3. Vested interests on the part of those whose jobs depend upon traditional schools exerted pressures to squelch the new kind of school.

4. Because alternative schools were generally linked with humanism, the schools declined as interest in humanistic values declined.

5. Alternative schools could not cope with the organizational problems posed by the new authority structure.[35]

Vernon H. Smith of Indiana feels alternative schools should be considered as being complementary to, rather than a replacement of, conventional schools. He acknowledges the contributions alternative schools have made to public education:

1. They meet specific needs which conventional schools do not.
2. They provide an experimental laboratory for educational ideas.
3. They stimulate self-examination on the part of conventional schools.
4. The provide for more participation by community members and parents.
5. They provide a process for continual renewal.
6. They pioneer in the use of a variety of facilities for learning.
7. They stimulate better teacher education programs.
8. The provide opportunities for educational choice within the community.
9. They stimulate more concern for accountability.[36]

Dr. Smith claims the development and operation of alternative schools to be a viable role for public education since the rationale for alternative schools enhances the role of public education rather than conflicting with it. He lists these four rationales:

1. People should have choice regarding the important aspects of their lives.
2. Pupils learn differently.
3. Learning in school should be closely allied to the world outside.
4. Individual schools should have the right to make the primary decisions concerning education within that structure.[37]

Roland S. Barth, Principal of the Angier School in Newton, Massachsetts, also indicates his feeling that the public school is the logical vehicle for providing responsible alternatives in education. Dr. Barth acknowledges the development of uniformity in our schools, chiefly for administrative convenience. He calls for

the development of several alternative kinds of schools within a school district and for alternative classrooms within individual buildings.[38]

There is evidence that public schools are already responding to the example and challenge of alternative schools. Programs which are spin-offs of well publicized alternative schools "...accomplish many of the same goals and offer students many real options in their learning opportunities."[39]

At this point, the future for alternative schools is uncertain, since their ultimate destiny depends upon their abilities to attract and hold pupils. There have been, however, some pragmatic conclusions drawn about the processes of alternative education which may be of considerable value to any school, public or private, which seeks to affect either revolutionary or evolutionary changes. A compilation of these observations follows:

1. Schools which are developed in response to a specific need generally work better than those designed simply to be alternative schools.

2. Teachers, administrators, and parents are all likely to find themselves unprepared for the experimentation required in alternative schools.

3. Without deep commitment on the part of those involved, the community school is likely to fall apart easily if hard times hit it.

4. Alternative education has stimulated many teachers, parents, and pupils to rethink what school is all about.

5. Smallness seems to be beneficial to an alternative school in that pride and ownership are generally more evident to the participants.

6. Smallness seems to be beneficial in that experimentation is easier and less costly.

7. Public funding through cooperative arrangements with local boards of education will be needed to maintain and enlarge the number of alternative schools.[40]

8. To be successful, an alternative school must rely upon persons with knowledge and skill in managing complex social systems such as schools.[41]

9. Education taking place outside of a school building is more appropriate for many young people than what is going on inside.

10. Schools must find ways to involve young people in jobs and volunteer work of social significance, and grant credit for these experiences.

11. Since there are no babies in high school, the baby sitting function should cease.

12. "Cooperation" must be developed to replace "competition" among students.

13. There is a necessity for continuous and systematic in-service training for high school teachers and administrators.

14. Students should be involved both in daily operation and planning of change in high schools.

15. Efforts to bridge the generation gap should be renewed on the basis of the best social knowledge we have.

16. Academic freedom should be extended downward into the high schools to facilitate discussion of relevant topics.

17. Basic skills and subject matter should be presented in such a way as to emphasize the importance of each of these areas in today's world.

18. New personnel positions must be acknowledged and developed to handle student learning away from the school building.[42]

19. Planners for alternative education should make an early decision about who is the target population and how it will be selected.

20. The school-within-a-school creates problems with territoriality and rules. As the alternative school becomes more physically removed from the "mother" school these problems diminish, but an attendant lack of support services generally develops.

21. It is necessary to devote time in involving students in boundry-making and rule-setting.[43]

22. Whether alternative education takes place within the context of the public school or outside of it, there is a critical need to match the learning styles of the pupils to the instructional program. Unless there is a conscious effort to identify learning styles and make decisions regarding admission to optional programs on that basis, the student is likely to be no better off than when there was only one program for everyone.[44]

CONCLUSION

Alternative education at the present time may be described as small but growing. It is not becoming a threat to public education or even a foe public education needs to fear. It is, rather, an adventerous partner, trying out new solutions to a variety of educational problems.

With all the blessings public education has long enjoyed; stable funding, facilities, and great numbers of pupils, it has never before had the luxury of a research and development component. By utilizing what is being learned about pupils and teaching in alternative schools, public education will now be in a position of responding much more adequately to the needs of pupils already walking through its halls.

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